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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Kyrgyz President Signs Restrictive Religion Law

Ref: 08 Bishkek 1135

**¶1.** (U) Summary: On January 12, President Bakiyev signed a restrictive law on religion, marking a significant change in the Kyrgyz Government's relations with religious organizations. The new law, passed by Parliament in November (Reftel), raises the minimum number of members required for registration to 200, and it bans proselytizing, among other changes. Local minority religious organizations opposed the law, and several international organizations had urged Bakiyev not to sign it. The law does not apply retroactively, and organizations already registered should not have to meet the 200-member minimum. End summary.

#### New Approach to Religious Organizations

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**¶2.** (U) On January 12, President Bakiyev signed a controversial new law on religion, exerting greater state control and banning certain activities. The new law raises the minimum number of members required for registration from 10 to 200. It bans proselytizing, prohibiting "insistent actions aimed at converting followers of one convention into other ones (proselytism)." The law also bans the distribution of religious literature in public places and in schools. The two recognized "traditional" religious organizations in the country, the Board of Muslims and the Russian Orthodox Church, supported the new law.

**¶3.** (SBU) Minority religious organizations, including Protestant denominations which became active here after Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991, opposed the law, seeing it as a threat to their activity. Evangelical groups had lobbied strongly against the bill, reaching out broadly for potential allies. The Embassy received numerous letters from small church groups asking for support in opposing the law. At a dinner on January 12, the evening of the bill's signing, the head of the Union of the Evangelical Christian-Baptists ruefully noted that they had made their views on the law known to the government, but the government had decided to move forward with the law anyway. He expressed a cautious hope that the government would not be overly energetic in the law's implementation.

¶4. (SBU) Many of these minority religious organizations do not have 200 members, as required by the new law for registration. Although the drafters of the law promised that the new law would not apply to religious organizations that had been registered prior to the publication of the law, Article 21 of the new law requires that "all religious organizations be guided in their activities by this law."

Comment

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¶5. (SBU) The signing of this law brings to an end the open approach of the Kyrgyz Government to religious organizations and missionary activity. Concerned about possible threats from religious extremists, and concerned about religious friction in some villages, the government has moved to assert stricter control over religious organizations and their activity. How minority religious organizations will be affected will depend on how the law is implemented. At a minimum, the law provides the government with a stick that can be selectively wielded against groups or organizations that it dislikes, for whatever reason.

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